



## N. E. THING COMPANY SECTION

*An Illustrated Introduction*

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*N. E. Thing is Art & Other Definitions*

*Images*

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## AN ILLUSTRATED INTRODUCTION TO THE N. E. THING CO. LTD.

N. E. Thing is Art: Theory and Practice.

*N. E. Thing is Art is a slogan of the N. E. Thing Co. Ltd.*

*Incorporated in 1966 by its co-presidents, Iain and Ingrid Baxter, the N. E. Thing Co. Ltd. is Art, and Art (Visual Sensitivity Information) is its business.*

When I first met Iain Baxter in 1964, he had recently completed a Masters degree in painting at Washington State University and had returned to Canada to accept a teaching position at the University of British Columbia. His wife Ingrid was principally involved in raising their children.

By 1964, Iain's painting had developed through Abstract Expressionism, and out the other side in search of a contemporary *realism*. He imitated, briefly, the style of Giorgio Morandi, but Morandi's humble, kitchen still lifes and sober country *vedute* held no lasting interest. Soon Iain was composing still life and landscape assemblages out of squashed or whole detergent bottles and plywood clouds and trees. These compositions were transformed by the Vacuum Form machine into one-piece, buterate and acrylic bas-reliefs. Next he made "bagged landscapes" and "inflatables" of heat-sealed vinyl. By 1966 he had moved from fashionable non-objective and abstract painting into the still fresh and controversial arena of Pop Art.

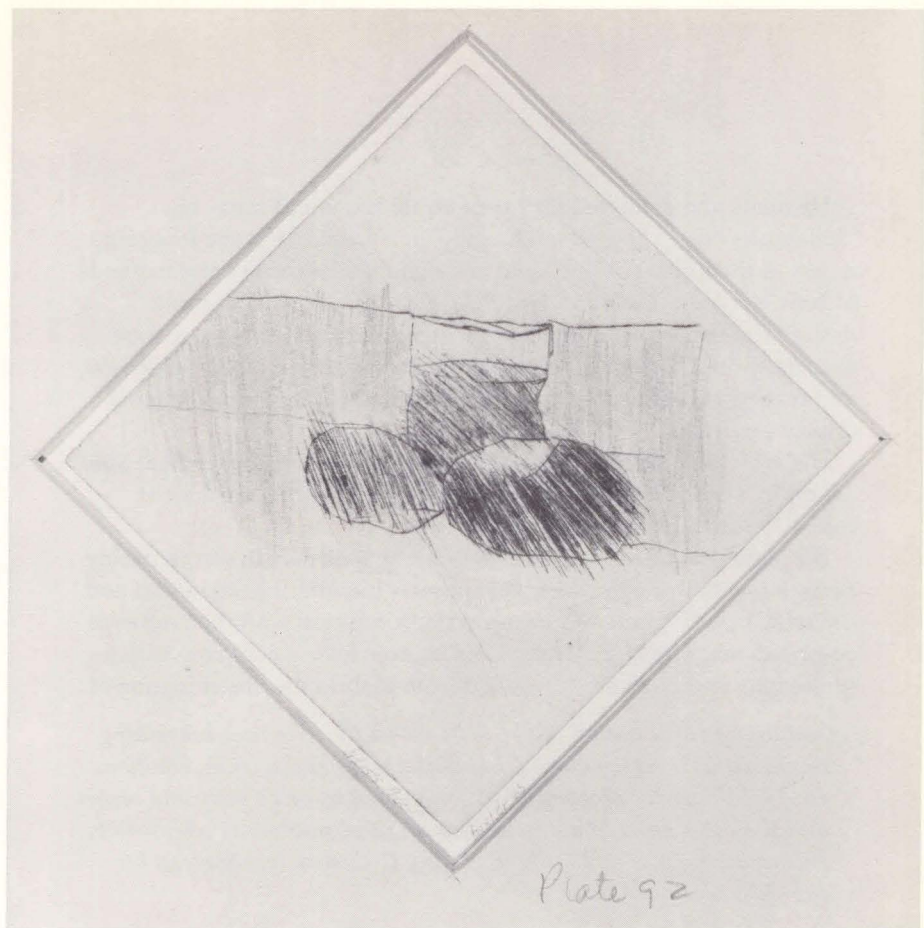


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He made and exhibited his Javex-bottle Vacuum Forms, his "inflatables" and "bagged landscapes" in a Canadian scene innocent, as yet, of the impact of the banal and commercial themes and methods of New York and London based Pop. He was Vancouver's most noticed experimenter in subject and medium, winning the purchase awards at the Vancouver Art Gallery's Annual Exhibitions in 1965-66, and staging exhibitions at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery that attracted critical attention.

His art was satirized in a Norris cartoon in the Vancouver *Sun*. *Sun* art critic, David Watmough, ruminated over his art in an article called, "Our Life Savagely Shafted."

No piece that he showed and no event he took part in was as daring as the *concept* through which he, and now his wife Ingrid, moved and thought. In 1966, Iain and Ingrid set up a business with themselves as co-presidents. The N. E. Thing Co. Ltd. was to be a company with a philosophy and purpose. It would devote itself to the dissemination of:

*Sensitivity Information (SI) . . . based on the idea that everything in the world is information (thoughts, things, facts, ideas, emotions etc.) and that all information is confronted by one's body and senses and then processed in a practical or sensitive manner . . . Sensitivity Information (was and is) N. E. Thing Co.'s new terminology for the older word CULTURE.*

It would divide Sensitivity information into the following areas: Visual Sensitivity Information (VSI) — painting, sculpture, prints, architecture, books, design etc.; Sound Sensitivity Information (SSI) — music, poetry (read aloud), singing, oratory, etc.; Moving Sensitivity Information (MSI) — dance, sports, etc.; Experiential Sensitivity Information (ESI) — events that combine aspects of all other areas. And, using a construct invented in 1965, the N. E. Thing Co. would designate certain artworks and objects as A.R.T. (Aesthetically Rejected Things) or A.C.T. (Aesthetically Claimed Things). What was chosen as A.C.T. or rejected as A.R.T. from the world of reality and the art of others would be judged by the N. E. Thing Co.'s "stringent standards."

By entering wholeheartedly into the fact and theory of the N. E. Thing Co. Ltd., the Baxters moved firmly away from seeing the artist's



role as *artmaker* to seeing his role as *perceiver*. Anything seen, heard, felt or thought by either of them would be considered as suitable content for data to be seen, heard, felt or thought of by the viewer. The viewer, in participating in the documentary fragments they presented as Sensitivity Information, takes part in the specific culture that created Iain and Ingrid; the viewer, in turn, is recreated by the culture they create. The Baxters' viewpoint logically extends Marcel Duchamp's insight that the artist through his works becomes *a mediumistic being*. N. E. Thing Co. products, however, are concrete and data giving, the antithesis of Duchamp's alchemical subjects. As much as Duchamp, however, the Baxters hope their art and performances will document the existential process of their own *becoming* and will engage and challenge the intelligence and sensuality of the spectator/participant.

As early as 1965, before the N. E. Thing Co. was formed, Iain was extending the traditional role of the artist beyond artmaker to performer. During the Festival of Contemporary Arts at UBC, which was called *The Medium is the Message* (out of respect for Marshall McLuhan), he destroyed a giant block of ice with a blowtorch. This act of wilful melting, entitled *2 Tons of Ice Sculpture: Beauty through Destruction, Disintegration and Disappearance*, challenged the spectator to consider this performance as "beautiful" and as Art. At the next Festival, the N. E. Thing Co. acted as "curator" for an eccentric exhibition called *Bagged Place*. The show, held in the Fine Arts Gallery on campus, contained no artwork by Iain or Ingrid. They brought a complete set of tacky furnishings within a wood and plastic "bungalow" that they had constructed inside the gallery space. All objects — tables, chairs, beds, food, turds in the toilet — were shrouded mysteriously in plastic. *Bagged Place* was provoking because it lacked ordinary aesthetic standards, but it was irritating because it was not *made* (simply chosen and arranged) by the N. E. Thing Co. What the N. E. Thing Co. was going to *do* was likely to be at least as daring as anything it would choose to make. At the two festivals, the company became a *verb* — a very A.C.T.-ive verb.

In the ten years that have followed, N. E. Thing Co. products have found their way into an amazing number of group shows that have focussed upon almost every major trend in contemporary art — Pop Art, New Realism, Minimal Art, Conceptual Art — and upon many minor ripples in the mainstream currents — Plastics, Art by Telephone, Mail Art. The N. E. Thing Co. has been chosen to represent Canada or the West on several occasions. The dozens and dozens of participations in exhibitions attest to the Baxters' great knack for operating within the gallery systems, and for taking care to know and be thought important by as many art officials as possible. Good P.R. and the ability to see the humour and chutzpah of the game that must be played is one of the several major reasons for the N. E. Thing Co.'s "omnipresence." At the same time that the company will solicit for group-show places, it will cheekily distribute buttons that declare: "Art is All Over," "Artofficial" and "N. E. Thing is Art."

Although the Baxters would admit to a penchant for novelty and enjoy being the first to use a material, explore a subject, create a certain kind of exhibition or performance, it is to the credit of the N. E. Thing Co. that especially when it acts alone or is in full charge of an event, all major products (from art shows through to movies) have integrity as a continuum — first of all because the business "philosophy" that was outlined in 1966 has provided a consistent but flexible viewpoint in which a diversity of experiments could be maintained; secondly, because over the years, the N.E. Thing Co. has found means of tying together the visual appearance of the products. Plastic and plexiglass remain important materials in which to create, package, or frame. Since 1965 photography of the documentary (not "arty") sort has assumed an increasingly major role in the preparation of artwork, and the artless, casually composed quality of photographic artworks carries over to the manufacture of uncut video and film records of events and experiences. Finally, all manner of business paraphernalia has been invented to stamp, seal, and otherwise claim for the company its products. A photo-silkscreened business form, for example, may be used as a background onto which photos and drawings of varying sizes and various subjects may be collaged; the business form background becomes, then, a major device to organize and homogenize in a visual way the diverse contents of an exhibition.

The seals and the stamps replace the traditional artist's signature and add bright colour to works assembled in a gallery.

Not simply by the broad definition it provides, the N. E. Thing Co. produces art in various media that receives serious and frequent attention by galleries and the art press. Although occasionally a critic finds a subject banal or an object aesthetically weak, I think there is no person familiar with the contemporary art scene as a whole who would not state that the N. E. Thing Co. has sustained over a very lengthy period a highly imaginative, inventive, flexible but well-integrated body of work. But I think there is another aspect of the N. E. Thing Co. character that begs special examination, and that is the role it assumes as educator of the senses. Art to the N. E. Thing Co. is Sensitivity Information that must be disseminated in order to increase the happiness and self-awareness of the general public, to improve, in the company's terms, the *Gross National Good*. When discussing public education, the Baxters become very excited and approach the subject with a "missionary zeal." What they do, it seems to me, is to arrange games for willing players. And play — the open-ended, exploratory, free-association play of happy children in which the rules adjust as the game is played — is what their artworks, events, videos and films are about. The games are sometimes played out principally by the Baxters themselves with the spectator participating with his eyes and mind; others invite direct response.

So what are the "games," what are the "rules," how and what does the viewer learn? Perhaps these questions can be answered best through a careful scrutiny of one project the N. E. Thing Co. completed between 1966 and the present.

In the *Piles* show of 1968, held at UBC's Fine Arts Gallery, the company worked with students. Within the gallery space, piles of material (eggshells, metal shavings, hair, etc.) were arranged in pyramid shapes on box-like plinths placed in a row. The material chosen from commonplace possibilities was elevated to the status of art by being brought into a gallery and set up with the formality usually associated with *serious* works of sculpture. Each pile of debris was arranged in a "geometric" shape and each pile could be appreciated (or not appreciated) through a consideration of its formal artistic properties — colour, texture, *presence*. Each pyramid put forward a variety of abstract subjects for consideration: animate/inanimate; metallic/organic; man-made/machine-made. The sequence was arranged tonally, like an artist's palette.



The piles-as-sculpture were supplemented by a slide show of other piles to be discovered around the city — at car wreckers, in untidy backyards, in bakeries, on after-dinner tables. A road map directed spectators to see certain piles, to rediscover the urban environment with piles in mind. A pile of postcards of piles was the catalogue for the exhibition.

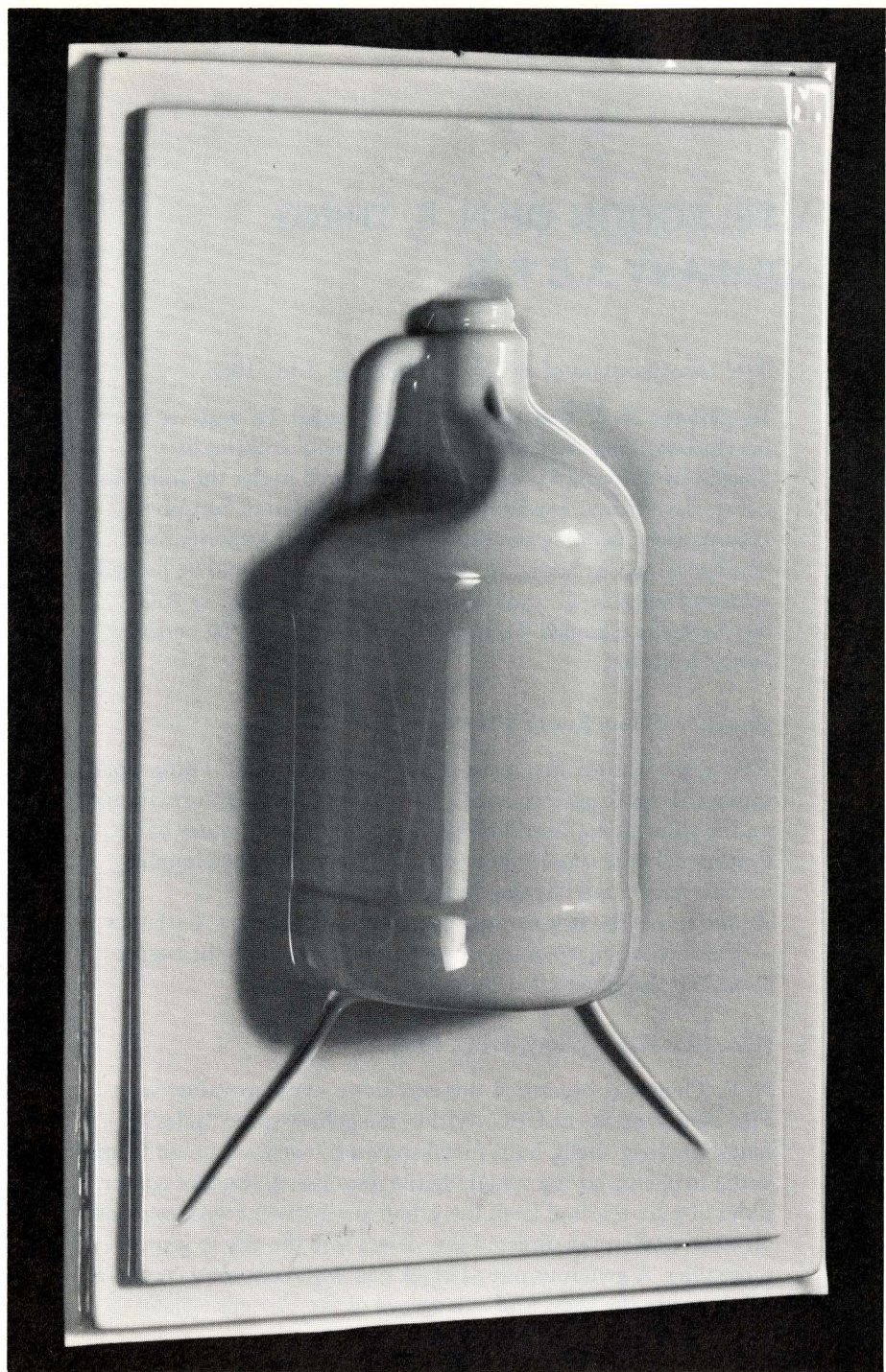
The exhibition in a playful, quasi-scientific way explored the meaning of the word *piles*. The “game” tested the spectator’s definition of *sculpture*. Can anything be seen and understood as sculpture that is organized by an artist within a gallery space? Are the urban piles the spectator chooses to see sculpture? What, if anything, separates the artist from the spectator?

This exhibition is typical of N. E. Thing Co. shows. All play with the concept of the definition of Art; all suggest, by implication, that the spectator must take charge of his perceptions to savour them, nourish them and use *them* in the way that the N. E. Thing Co. implies. If we could and would do that, our lives would be more full and joyful, because the Baxters teach us to celebrate and recreate the *commonplace*.

In choosing to present the N. E. Thing Co. as Art in *The Capilano Review*, I engaged myself in an act of Retro-Aesthetics — a Baxter term for the process of going back to consider something that had a powerful personal meaning in order to see how it looks and feels from the perspective of *the now*. I am still excited by the ideas and products of the N. E. Thing Co. and continue to educate myself through the process of the Baxters’ experience.

— A.R.





## A SELECTION OF N. E. THING COMPANY A.C.T.'S.

1. The Incorporation of the N. E. Thing Co. Ltd., 1966.

In 1966 the N. E. Thing Co. Ltd. was formed. Its business was the organization and dissemination of Sensitivity Information. Sensitivity Information would be considered under the following categories: Visual Sensitivity Information; Sound Sensitivity Information; Moving Sensitivity Information; Experiential Sensitivity Information. Works in all categories could be judged as records of A.R.T. (Aesthetically Rejected Thing) or A.C.T. (Aesthetically Claimed Thing). All choices were to be personal, hence, arbitrary.

2. *Aquatics*, Simon Fraser University, 1967.

This event was the first overt manifestation of N. E. Thing Co.'s interest in sport performance (Moving Sensitivity Information) and to this project Ingrid brought her expertise in water ballet. Centennial year was celebrated through the acts of swimming, making music and dancing in the water.

*Aquatics* was the first act in a construct called Retro-Aesthetics — the re-viewing/re-doing of something enjoyed in the past to check out the experience for its feel in the present.

3. *Piles*, Fine Arts Gallery, UBC, 1968.

N. E. Thing Co. organized this exhibition in co-operation with Fine Arts students at UBC. Within the gallery space "piles" of materials (egg-shells, hair, metal shavings) were set up on formal podia to elicit a strong visual/tactile response. A series of colour slides of piles selected from the urban environment was constantly on view, and a map directed the viewer into the city to inspect more piles. A generous pile of black and white photos served as a catalogue to the show and as a record of the concept.



4. *Fashion Show*, Burnaby Art Gallery, 1968.

N. E. Thing Co. claims to have invented the term *wearable* at the time of this exhibition, to designate clothing that is "worn as sculpture," that transforms body shape but is dependent on the body for some of its support. Karen Rowden and Evelyn Roth contributed some of their own wearables to the fashion show. The N. E. Thing Co.'s contributions were sculpted in plastic.

5. *5 Mile Section: Longest Movie in the World*, 1969.

The movie runs five minutes and is a direct uncut record of a five-mile stretch on Ontario's Trans-Canada highway. The movie camera was hand-held in the Baxter truck.

The Baxters, interested in the idea contained in the movie described above, submitted a request for funds to make *5,000 Mile Movie* in centennial year. It was intended to be:

*a film (measuring) Canada's life line (the Trans-Canada highway). The film (would show) geographical, cultural and ethnic variations . . . The viewer (would) be able to wander in and out of the movie for eight days . . . the movie sound track will include sections of ambient noise and interviews of people en route — a talk-show on wheels.*

In 1976 the Baxters plan to re-submit the 5,000 mile movie request hoping that it will be considered worth sponsoring in the more economical medium of colour-video.

6. *Trans V.S.I. Connection NSCAD-NETCO*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1969.

A 100-page document is the record of the Nova Scotia/N. E. Thing Company (NSCAD-NETCO) "connection." Iain was teaching at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the booklet shows the results of the interchange of information. Although the pamphlet is of indifferent visual quality it is very amusing to read. A receptive student writes of her project: *Put a Fairly Large Rock in the Crotch of a Tree*:

*This type of art is something you have to do to appreciate yourself before you can make other people understand it.*

An uncomprehending receiver of a Telex message at Inuvik sent back these words:

HAVE JUST READ UR MESS AND CANNOT MAKE HEADS OR TAILS  
OF IT PLS ADV IF IT IS PACIFIC WESTERN INUVIK U WANT OR  
ANOTHER COMPANY PLS EXPLAIN UR MEESAGE

7. *Building Structure*, Carman Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, 1969.

N. E. Thing Co. presented the act of building and the resulting balloon frame\* structure as sculpture at the Carman Lamanna Gallery. *Building Structure*, as "minimal" as a Sol LeWitt piece, was accompanied by a display of NETCO products.

\*The *balloon frame* is the essential two-by-four, post and lintel construction that underlies most North American domestic architecture.

8. *N. E. Thing Co. Calendar*, 10th Sao Paulo Biennial, 1969.

The N. E. Thing Co. A.C.T. & A.R.T. Depts. were selected to represent Canada's printmaking activities. The company prepared a calendar illustrated by a photograph of a product for each month. I remember a local printmaker being angry at this choice saying the N. E. Thing Company did not make prints. NETCO, of course, was chosen because it did *not* make prints, but used photography instead of traditional graphic media.

9. *Report on the Activities of the N. E. Thing Co. at the National Gallery of Canada*, Ottawa, June/July, 1969.

This exhibition was a major setting forth of the N. E. Thing Co.'s ideas and products. The whole exhibit took place in the real offices on the main floor of the NGO and in spaces erected by the company out of balloon frame and plywood. The visual effect of this exhibit was *department store* — an aesthetic (or non-aesthetic) that did not invite enthusiastic gallery response. The show, however, was a thorough visualization of ideas at the centre of NETCO current interests.



10. *Clichés Visualized*, 1969.

A thirty-minute videotape transforming English Language clichés into Visual Sensitivity Information.

11. *Buyer Supplier Night*, 1970.

A videotape probe into a male Buyer/Supplier gathering in Vancouver.

12. *Your Employee and Motivation*, Renton Washington, 1970.

N. E. Thing Co. co-presidents participated as consultants to data processing managers at Renton, Washington.

13. *Business Philosophy*, 1970.

A pamphlet created for distribution to the International Convention of Data Processing Managers Association in Seattle, Washington.

14. *Art and Computers*, Simon Fraser University, 1970.

The N. E. Thing Co. co-presidents conceived and organized a conference on this subject at Simon Fraser University.

15. N. E. Thing Co. as *Consultant re Viewer Participation*, 1970.

N. E. Thing Co. acted in Ottawa regarding a special TV show using television for direct viewer participation.

16. *North American Time Zone Photo V.S.I. Simultaneity*, October, 1970.

An N. E. Thing Co. publication dealing with the simultaneous photography of pre-selected subject matter by six Canadian photographers at the same moment in time in the six time zones in Canada.

17. *B.C. Almanac* (a publication of the National Film Board), 1970.  
N. E. Thing Co. contributed a selection of photographs to this group project. Like other artists included, their work concerned giving information and did not approach traditional "art" photography. NETCO's contribution was visually interesting and coherent in content.
18. N. E. Thing Co. Ltd. co-president is made Academician, Royal Academy of Art, 1970.
19. *Network*, 1970.  
Transmission of Visual Sensitivity Information between several schools and the N. E. Thing Co. Ltd., as effected by Telex and Telecopiers. Participating institutions were: Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma; Henry Gallery, Seattle; University of British Columbia; Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
20. N. E. Thing Co. Ltd. becomes member of the Vancouver Board of Trade, 1971.
21. Elaine Baxter changes her name to Ingrid (formerly her middle name) which, co-incidentally, made her initials and Iain's the same.
22. *Historical Aesthetic Projects*, 1971.  
While in Europe on a Senior Canada Council Grant, the N. E. Thing Co. Ltd. carried out the following projects:
  1. Reversal of Columbus' Voyage: N. E. Thing Co. Discovers Europe
  2. All Roads Lead to Rome
  3. Loch Ness Mystery
  4. Seeing Galileo's Laws of Gravity from the Leaning Tower of Pisa.
23. N. E. Thing Co. sponsors a hockey team in Downsview, Ontario, 1972.





24. *N. E. Thing Co. Sensitivity Information Research on Snow, Ice, Water, the North and the General Phenomenon of Winter, Banff, 1973/4, (Winter).*

This exhibition held at the Peter Whyte Gallery, Banff, was one of the most important presentations of NETCO-THINK. All the material was presented on business form backgrounds and all subjects related wittily to the concept of winter. Skiing was presented as a drawing and sculpting skill, visual/verbal plays were made on many Canadian experiences of the north, e.g. ARTIC (misspelled). A vinyl snowcap was designed for a snow-less mountain. The exhibition was an evocative and humourous "snow-job."





25. *N. E. Thing Co.: Research with Language, Food and Colour*, 1974.

This exhibition, organized by Chris Youngs, took place at the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick. It investigated the correspondence between colour language used in association with food and food products and the real colour of these products. Suitable experiments were performed on food purchased from a local supermarket and the food was arranged within the gallery space on tables in a clinical fashion.

26. *N. E. Thing Co. Ltd. Sensitivity Information: Language/Sex*, 1974.

A variation upon the theme of the "food" show and earlier work in English Language Clichés Visualized, this show contained photos illustrative of sexual parts, sexual actions and the words applied to these parts and actions. There were also works exploring non-sexual clichés and children's jingles.

27. *And They Had Issue*, 1975.

This was an exhibition at York University of the birth certificates and geneology of the Baxters' families. Two plinths — one for each of their children — were erected. During one day, the children, Erian and Tor, sat on their podia to demonstrate that the most artistic product of anyone is his/her children.

28. *Monopoly Game With Real Money*, York University, 1975.

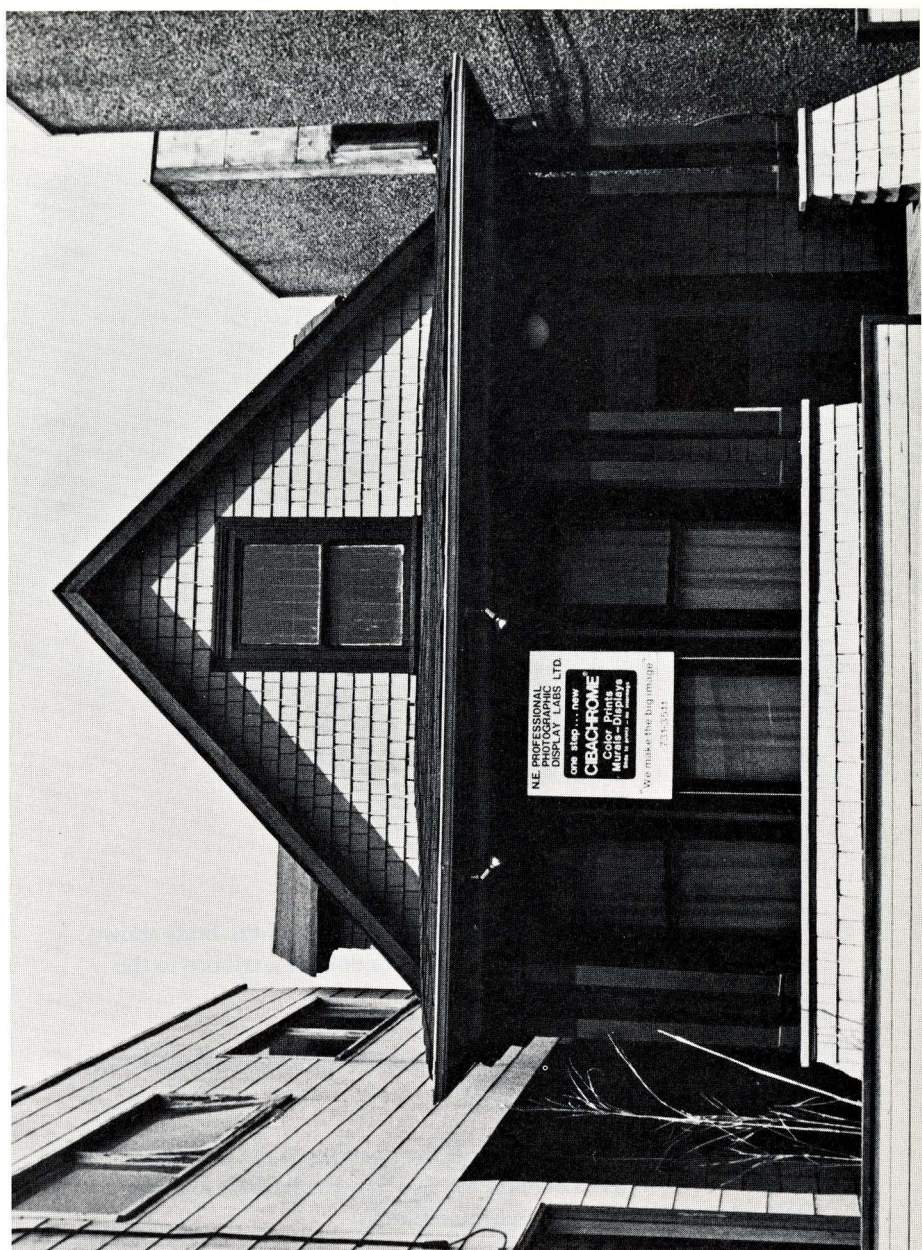
This event took place within a Toronto Dominion Bank on the campus of York University. Real money was used in the game. A videotape was made as a record of the game.

29. *N. E. Thing Co. buys into Vancouver Magazine*, 1975.

30. *N. E. Thing Co. creates a photo lab for CIBACHROME*, 1974.

Called the N. E. Professional Photographic Display Labs Ltd., this company produces fine colour photography by a special process.





31. N. E. Thing Co. Thinks toward a Celebration of the Body show for the Agnes Etherington Gallery, London, as a tribute to the Olympics, June 20 - July 31, 1976.
32. N. E. Thing Co. Thinks towards an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, December 1, 1976.
33. N. E. Thing Co. Thinks towards the opening of the I Scream, You Scream, We All Scream for Eye Scream Parlour Ltd. on West 4th next to the Cibachrome Outfit.
34. The N. E. Thing Co. is always thinking about their on-going project, *What Is Art?*

— A.R.



## N. E. THING IS ART & OTHER DEFINITIONS

*N. E. Thing is art.* — N. E. Thing Co. Ltd.

The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else. Art as art is nothing but art. Art is not what is not art.

— Ad Reinhardt, quoted in Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," *Studio International*, Vol. 178 No. 915 (October 1969), p. 134.

This conceptual art then, is an inquiry by artists that understand that artistic activity is not solely limited to the framing of art propositions, but further, the investigation of the function, meaning, and use of any and all (art) propositions; and their consideration within the concept of the general term "art."

— Joseph Kosuth, "Introductory Note by the American Editor," *Art-Language*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (September 1970).

I have all the information in the world, all the mythic forms ever known, everything that I'm plugged into as a human being, for my raw material. My apparent use of experience is not meant to imply anything about that particular experience. It's a conceptual model which is meant to have implications for representation and revelation pointing toward everything else in a multi-leveled way. I'm really posing the question of renegotiation of experience, rather than saying, take my experience.

— Douglas Huebler, "Concept vs. Art Object," *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 46 No. 6 (April 1972), p. 53.

What art now has in its hand is mutable stuff which need not arrive at the point of being finalized with respect to either time or space. The notion that work is an irreversible process ending in a static icon-object no longer has much relevance.

— Robert Morris, in *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (New York: The New York Cultural Center, 1970), p. 34.

1. The artist may construct the piece
2. The piece may be fabricated
3. The piece need not be built

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to conditions rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

— Lawrence Weiner, "Documentation in Conceptual Art," *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 44 No. 6 (April 1970), p. 42.

Is there anything that is not art? I must admit in my own mind, it's not really outside the stream, but in the riverbed together with the rest of the water.

— Robert Barry, in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), p. 41.

Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context — as art — they provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is he is saying that that particular work of art *is art*, which means, is a *definition* of art. Thus, that it is art is true *a priori*.

— Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," *Studio International*, Vol. 178 No. 915 (October 1969), p. 136.

The idea becomes the machine that makes the art.

— Sol LeWitt, quoted in Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," *Studio International*, Vol. 178 No. 915 (October 1969), p. 134.

The working premise is to think in terms of systems, the production of systems, the interference with and the exposure of existing systems.

— Hans Haacke, "Things and Theories," *Artforum*, Vol. X No. 9 (May 1973), p. 32.

Art-Language attempts to define the forms of judgment through an analysis of reason; instead of accepting the object as given, cognition itself is under examination.

— Lizzie Borden, "Three Modes of Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, Vol. X No. 10 (June 1972), p. 69.

I start by thinking I'm going to make use of all possibilities without troubling any longer about problems when something starts to be art. I don't make the *eternal* work of *art*, I only give visual information. I'm more involved with the process than the finished work of art. The part of my object is untranslated. I think objects are the most usual part of my work. I'm not really interested any longer to make an object.

— Jan Dibbets, in *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (New York: The New York Cultural Center, 1970), p. 31.

A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist's mind to the viewers. But it may never reach the viewers, or it may never leave the artist's mind.

— Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *Art-Language*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (May 1969).

The essential quality of existence concerns where one is at any instant in time: that locates everything else. Location, as a phenomenon of space and time, has been transported by most art forms into manifestations of visual equivalence: that is, as an experience located at the ends of the eyeballs. I am interested in transposing location directly into "present" time by eliminating things, the appearance of things, and appearance itself. The documents carry out that role using language, photographs and systems in time and location.

— Douglas Huebler, in *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (New York: The New York Cultural Center, 1970), p. 31.



I really believe in having projects which in fact can't be carried out, or which are so simple that anyone could work them out. I once made four spots on the map of Holland, without knowing where they were. Then I found out how to get there and went to the place and took a snapshot. Quite stupid. Anybody can do that.

— Jan Dibbets, in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), p. 121.

I'm not a poet and I'm considering oral communication as a sculpture. Because, as I said, if you take a cube, someone has said you imagine the other side because it's so simple. And you take the idea further by saying you imagine the whole thing without its physical presence. So now immediately you've transcended the idea of an object that was a cube into a word, without a physical presence. And you still have the essential features of the object at your disposal. So now, if you just advance a little, you end up where you can take up a word like time and you have the specific features of the word "time." You're just moving this idea of taking a primary structure and focusing attention on it.

— Ian Wilson, in *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (New York: The New York Cultural Center, 1970), p. 39.

I do not mind objects, but I do not care to make them.

— Lawrence Weiner, in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), p. 217.

Twenty-six gasoline stations, various small fires, some Los Angeles apartments, every building on the Sunset Strip, thirty-four parking lots, Royal road test, business cards, nine swimming pools, crackers.

— Edward Ruscha, in *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (New York: The New York Cultural Center, 1970), p. 35.

You work because you work; or  
You cannot *not* work.

— Ken Friedman, "Fluxus and Concept Art," *Art & Artists*, Vol. 7 No. 7 (No. 79, October 1972), p. 52.

— S.H.

## IMAGES

*Iain Baxter*, detail, exhibition poster for *Gas, Plastic, & Bagged Works*, Art Gallery of Victoria, 1966.

*Still Life*, 9" x 9", etching, artist's proof, 1965.

*Still Life: 1 Javex Bottle*, 22½" x 14½" vacuum-formed plastic, 1964.

*N. E. Thing Co. Ltd. Hockey Team: Downsview, Ontario*, 3" x 5", mounted color photo, 1972-3.

*Studies for Works in S.I.R. on Snow, Ice, Water, etc.*, 3" x 5", black/white photos, 1968.

*Cibachrome Photo Lab*, 4th & Burrard, Vancouver, 1974.

*Act #32: Seven Steel Pilings Gravel Filled, White Lake Narrows, Ontario, Canada*, 27½' x 40', black/white photo, 1968.

*See*, 18" x 18", felt pen on offset litho, 1973.

*Galileo's Experiment Seen*, 40" x 40", felt pen & photo on offset litho, 1971.

*Cash in Hand*, 19½" x 23½", hand-tinted black/white photo, 1972.

*Planning*, 16" x 19", black/white photo 1969.

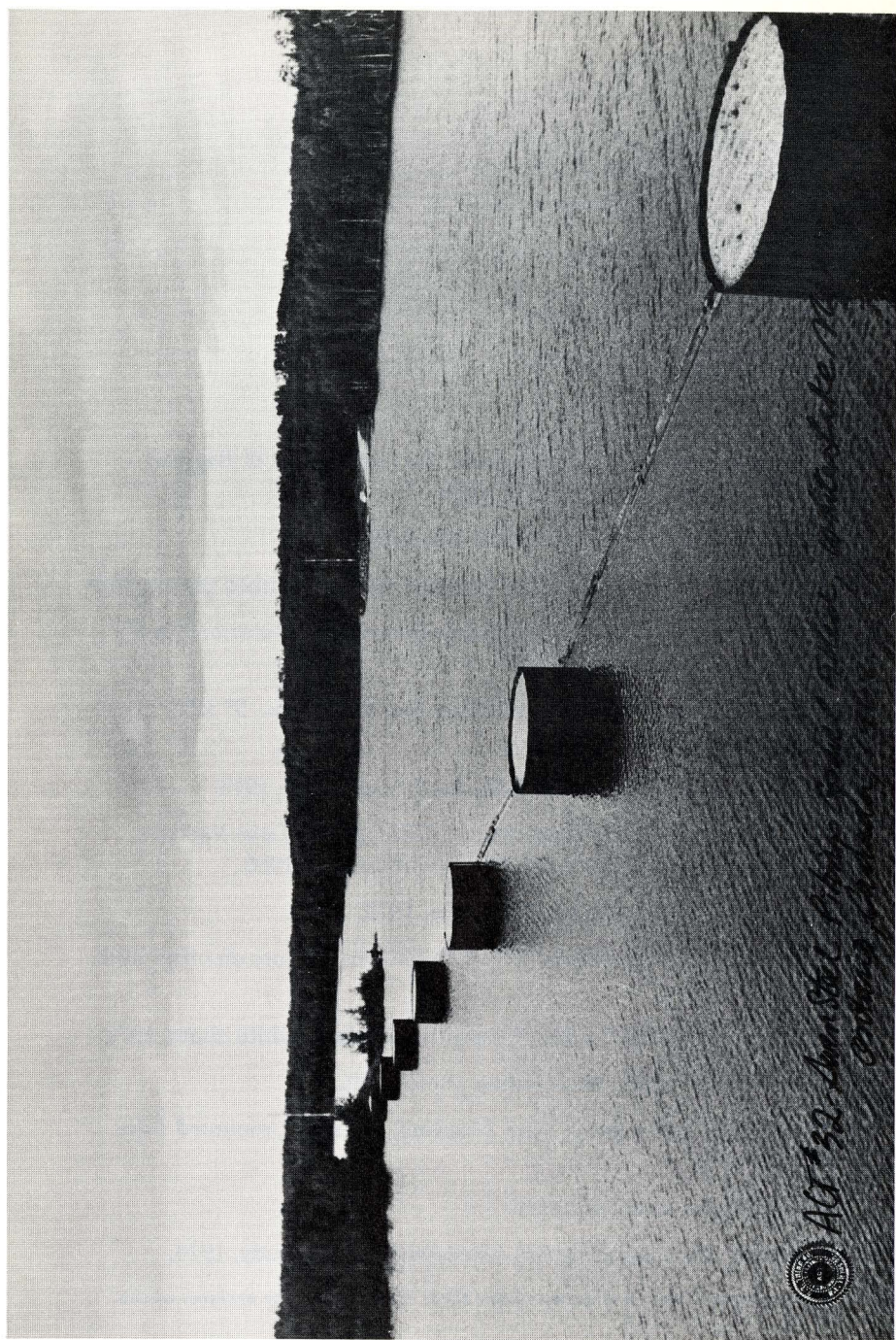
*President of a Company: Face Screwing*, 36" x 42", mounted color photos, 1969.

*Ingrid Baxter*, detail of above.

*Stamping Machine*, 8" x 10", black/white photo study, 1974.

*Photography: Tod Greenaway reshot these images from the archives of the N. E. Thing Co. Ltd.*







# INFORMATION

N.E.THING CO. LTD.

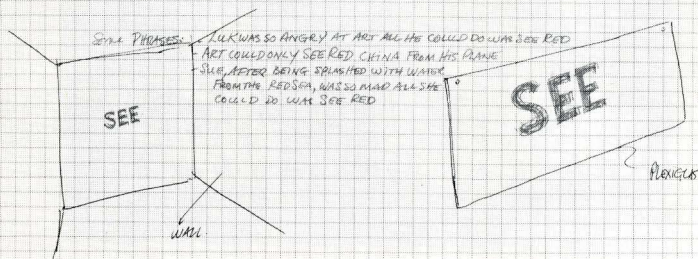
1419 Riverside Drive North Vancouver B.C. Canada Tel. (604) 929-3662 Telex 04-507802 Cable Anything Vancouver B.C.

Project  
1971-73

COLOR - LANGUAGE STUDIES  
COMMON COLOR PHRASES - "SEE RED"

Number  
2.

# SEE



## Description

DRAWING STUDIES FOR PLASTIC LETTERING TO BE APPLIED TO WALL AS COMPLETED WORK, LETTERS COULD BE MOUNTED DIRECTLY TO WALL OR APPLIED TO CLEAR PLEXIGLAS, THEN MOUNTED TO WALL.



FOR REPRODUCTION, REDUCE ENTIRE PRESENTATION INCLUDING THIS STATEMENT.

LAYOUT SHEET INFORMATION DEPARTMENT N.E.THING CO. LTD.

# INFORMATION

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1419 Riverside Drive North Vancouver B.C. Canada Tel. (604) 929-3662 Telex 04-507802 Cable Anything Vancouver B.C.

Project

3

PROJECT DEPARTMENT

GALILEO'S EXPERIMENT SEEN - 1971

Number

3.71



## Description

PLACE - PISA, ITALY

TIME - DEC. 3, 1971

MATERIALS - CAMERA (OBJECT DROPPED)  
- FILM

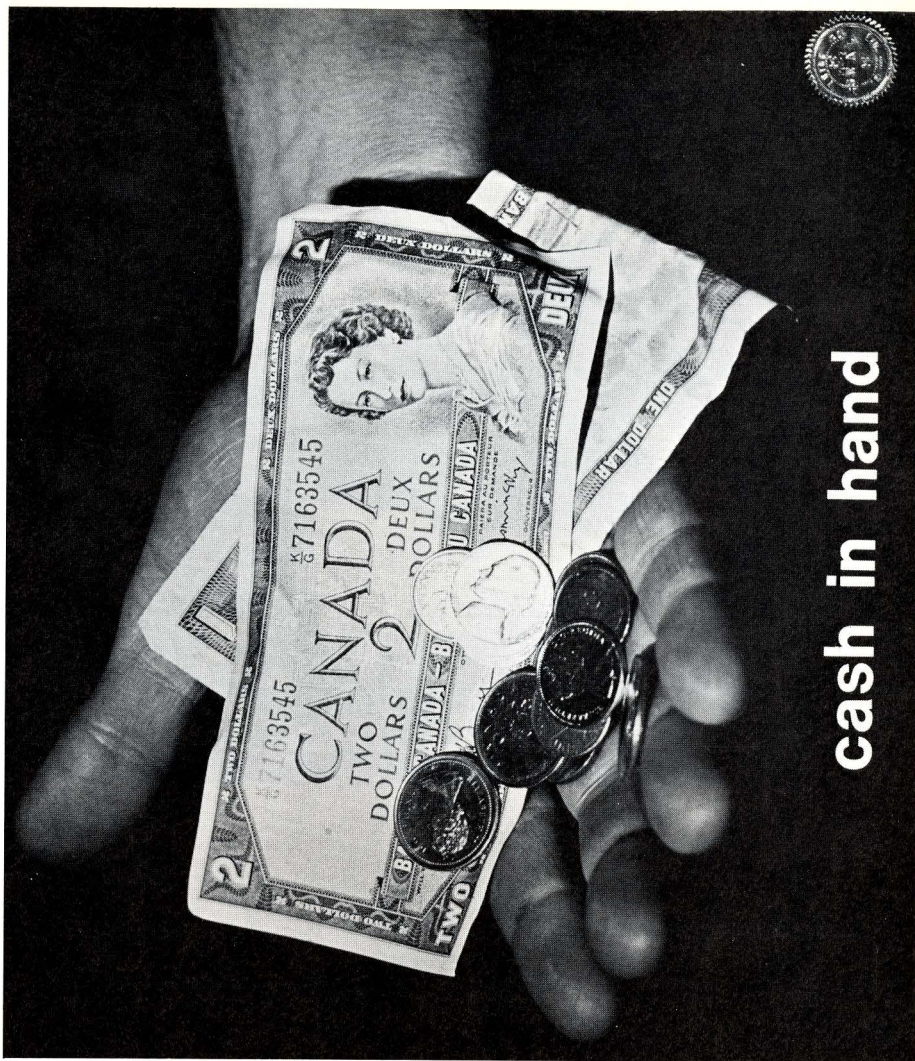
NOTE: DOTTED LINE DENOTES PATH OF FALLING  
OBJECT - CAMERA

AS CAMERA WAS DROPPED IT WAS  
PLACED ON CONTINUOUS RUN

Seal







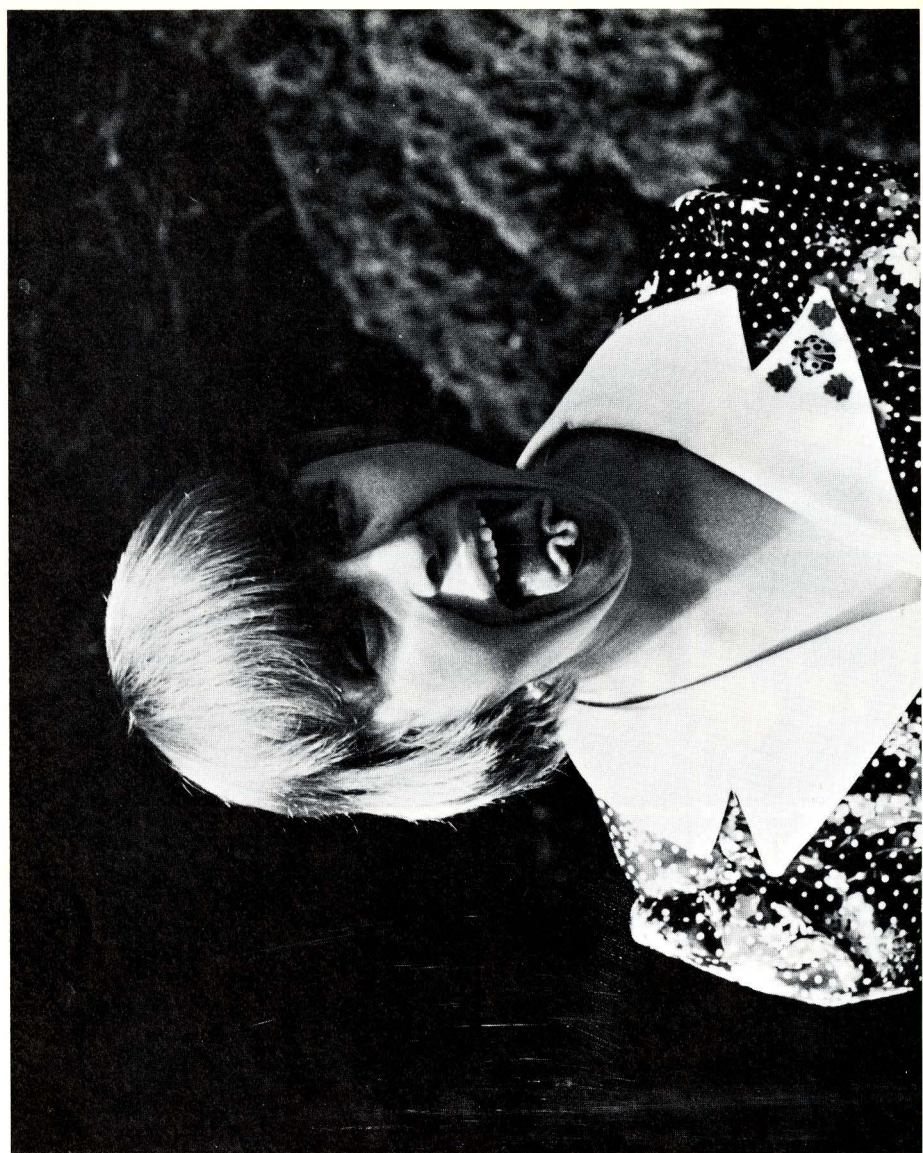
cash in hand













## INTERVIEW / N. E. THING CO.

*Iain and Ingrid Baxter, co-presidents of the N. E. Thing Co., were interviewed on the evening of February 23rd at Ann Rosenberg's house. Paul Gresco, journalist, Paul Mitchell, partner in the Eye Scream Parlour, and Steve Harris of The Capilano Review were present. They are indicated by initials in the text.*

*The interview began with Paul Gresco asking Ann Rosenberg why the N. E. Thing Co. was of interest to her. Ann replied that the company was of interest chiefly because it demonstrated that art could be chosen, designated. She noted that while N. E. Thing Co. products had artistic value, they were not principally concerned with traditional craftsmanship.*

*InB* There is craftsmanship in everything we do. It's just not the usual recognizable oil-painting technique-y craftsmanship — the kind of crafts that usually apply to the whole field of art.

*PG* So what kind of craftsmanship is entailed in your art?

*InB* The total making of, presenting your object (first of all) is a professionalism, and a craftsmanship in the basic concept of the idea. There is craftsmanship at that level. And then to take it beyond that, to present it in any form to anyone to understand, there is craftsmanship also involved. But it may involve photography, or it may involve knowing how to walk your fingers through the Yellow Pages, or how to use the right business format, or whatever else. But those are all levels of craftsmanship.

*AR* For example you use photographs: you have in many of your works a sense of the quick take.

*InB* Sometimes we use *bad* photographs, but they're perfectly used.

*AR* Sometimes they're bad, and that's okay. Within your aesthetic, that's proper.

*InB* And we do. I know oftentimes we're criticized for just that. People who are used to judging things for the artsy-craftsy direction of craftsmanship will pick up on that because it's a very easy thing to tag to.

*IB* And also a lot of people think everything we do is very easy to do, so it's very simple or easy.

*PG* Well, how do you defend yourself on that?

*InB* I can imagine just as I've done.

*PG* . . . the criticism that it looks so easy: well, arranging rocks in a pile. I'm just purposefully playing devil's advocate.

*IB* Everything's easy once you've seen it done. When someone sees it — oh, well, a kid could do that. Of *course*, because you've seen the realization of the idea, or the thing that may *appear* very simple, but it's a whole thought process that's gone on.

*InB* So basically, I guess we're emphasizing the idea.

*SH* It's all related to Sensitivity Information, right?

*InB* Mm hm.

*SH* So that everything is worked through that idea, then.

*InB* *That* we sort of evolved as a method of explaining to people what we're doing, because you come up with the whole basic "what is art?" question. Is this "art"; is a pile of rocks "art"? And we have so much hanging into that word "art" that the general public has clouded their minds with, that they can't see art. And so this is why we've introduced the concept of "sensitivity information."

*PG* Using your own broad definition of art: have you ever had a failure in any pieces you've done? Aren't you building in a safety factor for yourselves?

*InB* Our failures are in the garbage can. (Laughter)

*PG* Have they actually appeared in the garbage can?

*InB* Oh yeah; I think some things you do toss out. I don't think you would publicly present . . . I think you work through an idea and you reject it, on one level. The garbage can may be a back corner of our mind or something, rather than the can outside.

*IB* Sometimes you get things that are just too trite.

*InB* And looking back, you have things that you're more pleased with or more satisfied with than others, or some things that you wish you'd done slightly differently.

*IB* It's also interesting to look back, say ten years ago, at things we did. And you realize that your maturity and your understanding were at a certain level. And you go back and appreciate how good *those* were given that limited knowledge.



*AR* I found, thinking back, that most of the things that I saw I still like to the same degree. I'm a little more puzzled about where you are right now.

*InB* That would probably be true if you went back at any single point in time; you would be puzzled at our "now" position.

*PG* I think more so now. Listen, I heard a criticism of you guys recently: that you're at kind of a plateau now and you really haven't re-established your presence on the West Coast.

*IB* That's great.

*InB* Perhaps that's our magnum opus. (Laughter)

*PG* The criticism is that you're really casting about wildly, and you haven't really focused on anything.

*InB* No, we're focusing. Focusing like hell.

*PG* Okay, that brings us into the whole economic thing.

*InB* Because that is our focus and direction, very solidly.

*PG* Hey, what the hell are you guys doing?

*InB* Bending the corkscrew and enjoying the feel. (Laughter)

*PG* No, seriously. In terms of getting out with these commercial ventures, why and how do you rationalize it?

*InB* I don't see it as getting out; out is the wrong word. It's getting deeper *in*, if anything.

*AR* Could we backtrack then, because what I wanted to ask is this: why are you as artists interested in business, and why do you keep nibbling on it, and what's happening.

*InB* That goes back a long way, doesn't it? Really to the very basics of what Iain began right at the very first. That folding screen is really a questioning of system. Can you take painting, as we had flowed through, and put it on a traditional Japanese format (the folding screen) which then gave you a totally new dimension? So that's questioning a system.

*IB* That very much upset the Japanese, by the way, because they have this traditional way with those paper things because their society is so ritualized. The folding screens are supposed to be done with sumi ink.\*

*\*Note: Iain was in Japan on a painting scholarship in 1961. — AR*

*InB* It was always so, huh? They had art galleries in department stores; so this is the next thing. Can you have art in department stores, in a public place, where you have far more people flowing through than you ever do if your art gallery is isolated? The traditional system of a gallery is to hang something on the wall, forget it for the next month . . . We began thinking: well, 8,000 people come through a gallery in a month; 20,000 go through IBM in three days.

*PG* Looking back, can you see a real seminal thing in terms of the business involvement? You talk about the Japanese screen and Japanese department stores, but even beyond that was there something in either of you that said, "Business intrigues me"?

*InB* This was what I was building up to: that we were questioning systems. Can we present our visual ideas and our sensitivity information inside another kind of space? So what we're doing with the Eye Scream Parlour is building a vehicle to make visual statements, or sensitivity statements, or cultural statements of one sort or another. And so, the business *has* to be a financially rewarding thing for everyone involved. It has to turn bucks, so to speak. But the main point is to attempt to present a totally new, interesting environment for people to be in, to see new ideas to support. Maybe artists should no longer remain only in galleries and isolated spaces; they have a responsibility to the community.

*AR* I think we all sense that funds are drying up fast, and there's going to be this big, horrible depression or whatever; that artists are the first to lose their opportunity for grants. So it's a rational act also to survive, and also not lose your stance. For some artists to say, "Okay, I'm suddenly in business," you say, "Oh, sold out, eh?"

*InB* We're sold *in*. (Laughter)

*PG* You can rationalize it beautifully. How much of this is serendipity? If you had gone after and got a really nice York University-type job here, would you have gone into these business ventures with the same vengeance?

*IB* I think they would have happened, but maybe a little slower.

*PG* I'll have to admit that your leanings have always been that way.

*InB* There *is* a matter of necessity involved, I think.

*IB* But it was going to come at one point or other. We knew we wanted to go through with these things to find out what it was like.

*PG* Is the Cibachrome thing much more of a straight commercial venture with less room to play around visually?

*InB* Yes and no . . .

*IB* (to Ingrid) I think yes and no, like you're saying.

*PG* Give me an example, then.

*InB* (to Iain) Which one do you want?

*IB* On the one hand "yes" — that's a tattoo I want to do one day. The way to do it is: I want to have a "no" and a "yes" in my hands so when a question comes up I can say, well, on the one hand "yes," on the other hand "no." I want to have them in my palm. (Laughter) The Cibachrome thing has been taking a good year or two to set up. It's much more complicated in one way than the restaurant idea, because it takes time to build its reputation.

*PG* Eventually what could happen with Cibachrome?

*IB* We see it functioning; we see the thing as theatre, and as re-organizing information. Here's a good point about it: we just bought space on the B.C. Directory — that secret book that has everybody's name and where they work. A guy phones up and says do you want to put an ad in, and we say okay. So we always



check into everything, and the art side of this happened. And I said, can we ever get on the cover? He said, sometimes there's a space available, and I think there's one right now. So he phones and he finds out that there's an outside strip on the cover available. It's amazing how they sell this. There's one strip; it's three-quarters of an inch. When you buy that, you automatically get a full page inside, and everything happens for you because you're on the *cover*.

So I got to thinking, and we talked about it. We decided they should have a ruler. So we put a ruler on, right on the edge, so people can measure things because you always want to measure pencils and stuff, right? So the ruler says: "We Measure Up — N. E. Professional Photo Display Lab — We Measure Up, see page such-and-such." Now maybe we'll do a print of this book, and it will say, because I know exactly how many books there are, because I can phone them, there's that many inches. All those inches, and the concept of the whole thing. It just opens up all the potential. If we ever show in a major art gallery again, then we will just churn all that stuff back in there, present all sides of it, juggle it, and give you new ways of looking at things.

*AR* Do you suppose that when you do your Art Gallery show in the next year that you'll be starting to refer to your businesses?

*IB* Oh yeah; it's going to start moving. We have a show coming up in the Vancouver Art Gallery with about half the Gallery in next December. When that goes on, we'll be heavily promoting — just presenting all these businesses, right inside a public space. It'll be like putting a burr under the saddle of that situation which will then probably upset people in a very healthy way.

*AR* You'll have to have an ice cream parlour right in the gallery.

*IB* That's what we're going to do. We'll give tickets for ten cents off a cone, all kinds of things. Plus, we'll probably take heavy ads out that month. We'll be able to say, no business in Vancouver has ever had a show in an art gallery!

We want to have videotapes of how to lick a cone. We were thinking of having a contest of beautiful women just sitting licking cones, and see which is the most beautiful girl that can

lick a cone. We could go into a whole, erotic level like that which would be really fun. But it also has the seriousness of like, A & W does Miss Teen Canada. Maybe we will have an ice cream cone art show from various paintings and stuff.

*PM* You were saying before that, to make a business work, you've got to go through with the same processes that you do to make a piece of art work. And to make the artwork function, you have to do the same sort of thing as in the business.

*IB* In our society there are certain businessmen — a number of men are just super geniuses in terms of the level of sensitivity they move to — using all the tools in the structure they work with.

*PG* Does the word "satire" say anything to you in terms of what you're doing? I just have to get that out of the way. I mean, just that word, bald, unadorned: does it explain anything of what you're doing? Or is that too weak a word, or is it not precise enough, or is it relevant? I just want to throw it on the table.

*InB* (Looking) Find it? (Laughter)

*PG* It's reeling around there, waiting to be seen.

*IB* A lot of those words work for us, like wit, and satire, and irony.

*PG* Those are three very distinct words.

*InB* What do you mean by satire, then?

*PG* I guess I have to get your definition.

*SH* I haven't thought of you as real satirists, although you always approach everything with a sense of humour.

*PG* (To Steve) Then what do you see them as?

*InB* We've been to Yuma, and have a sense thereof. (Laughter) I guess as you say it Paul, I don't really know what you mean.

*IB* But whatever it is, I think we do some of it. (Laughter) I think that if you can juggle humour and satire and irony, you can get new insights. That's what McLuhan talks about: using satire and humour as probes for getting new ways of looking at things. I think we've been just doing them intuitively.

*InB* Can you think of anything more satirical than an N. E. Thing Company? An artist doing a business? Bizarre!

*SH* I was reading through *Six Years* at the library. It said that the reason Lucy Lippard was so interested in you initially was that you were carrying out many investigations simultaneously with American artists without being aware of what they were doing as well. How much were you aware of current conceptual trends?

*InB* No, a lot of the stuff . . . An example is: up at Simon Fraser, we dug a quart hole and put a quart of paint in it. And I think a week later we saw in *Look Magazine* (which was still alive at that time) that Larry Weiner had filled a hole in the earth with paint. And his approach to that same thing was a different approach. We did a quart and a quart. There are differences involved in it.

*IB* That's one of the problems you suffer: being provincial. It's the same problem [*The Capilano Review*] suffers from in terms of the magazines that come out of New York or London, or other quarterlies. It's the very idea that, for some reason, if you happen to live in a major city or the major power base, then everything else that happens outside is not as crucial or important. We've always been fighting against that.

*InB* We were hit — we've not been to New York very many times — I think me only twice — but I was really struck by the provincialism of New York, how extremely narrow it was. Unless it happened in New York, it hadn't happened at all. They're so closed to everything that's going on — it was amazing to me. And it's only people like Lucy that break out of that and realize there are things happening elsewhere, and have a bit of conscience, responsibility, wherewithal to bring it into New York to get it into the galleries.



*IB* Like for instance, when they did that big show of information in New York several years ago, '69 or something; it was a major show of people all over the world doing this information thing. Then the review in *Newsweek* covered mostly the guys in New York. And I've talked to Lucy Lippard and people, and what happens is the guy who writes it lives there and knows these few people. And he just phones them and says, hey, have you got a photograph Joe, or Jack, and the guy runs a photograph in.

And so we wrote a letter to the editor which said that the whole information show was based on the theory of communication and the exchange of ideas, and that they were so provincial they couldn't even use the processes involved in the show to find out and to contact other people in various parts of the country. You can pick up a phone and phone somebody, and take the thing down in telex or whatever. There's *piles* of stuff, right? And it's very frustrating when you can't really do anything about it unless you move to New York. Or, if you decide to stay somewhere else and just comment on it, then you have to get more powerful so you can hit New York with a certain power.

And we've done essentially some of that because we were able to make it into *Time International* and on the covers of certain magazines. It all happened by just using media. A lady asked for a bunch of information for an article. She somehow got our name through Lucy and she phoned us. And so I sent her a telex — a telegram right to her house — just using the systems where someone else wouldn't do it. They might phone, or walk to her place or something. And it just amazed her because she couldn't believe that someone would do those things. So it was using, penetrating through very powerful means.

*PM* Was that why you put a telex machine in your office?

*IB* Yeah. It's really a useful tool.

AR Do you still have one?

IB No, I haven't been able to pay for one. But we'll eventually get one, in the restaurant or someplace.

We've been very much involved with all those things, and the sad thing is these things cost a lot of money. And I think artists have had one of the worst shakes. All artists — I'm talking theatre, music and everybody. In universities, in terms of research. Because they don't want to give funds to guys that do research in areas considered non-scientific or something. But I think it's just as valid in terms of making our lives more wholesome and more understandable and more reasonable to deal with everything. But the arts don't get the research grants, right? I fully agree with having research on health activities and so on, but the health of our people may be very much concerned with the fact that they aren't having a healthy balance with quality of life.

SH So what the problem is, is probably that things are divided into categories — and certain categories are allowed that research money and others aren't.

IB I think categoritis is one of our worst diseases.

PG One of the things I want to get, in terms of the piece I want to do on you guys for the book, is why you came back to the West Coast. Is it strictly an anti-Toronto, anti-Eastern feeling, or is it really because the West Coast means something to you?

InB You know *precisely* why we came back here. (Laughter) Why are you here?

PG Exactly. But I want to get all the people I talk to, to talk about the coast, or B.C.

InB One of my ways of describing that is when we had the trip to Europe: a year to travel around, explore our roots, meet our relatives and see where we came from. We were on the Isle of Skye and ran into a girl who spoke Gaelic. We said, "Are you from Skye?" And she said, "Aye, I belong to Skye." And I had not heard it put that way. And so then, of course, immediately

the question goes falling over yourself: where do you belong? And I think if I have any definition of a feeling of belonging to any part of the landscape or world or whatever, it's Vancouver.

*IB* Let's look at an idea I'm thinking of now; that possibly when you create certain major ideas in your life in a certain locality, the environmental ideas themselves are the reason you want to stay there — because of the ideation that evolved.

*InB* That happened at a certain point, huh? We talk about our aesthetic being based on distance; and this meaning from Toronto, from New York, from the whole publishing centres of our industry.

*PG* The reason *I'm* here is because everything has happened in Toronto, as far as I'm concerned. There's so many possibilities here. It's still unformed. The frontier quality . . . frontier meaning not a boundary in the conventional sense, but a place unexplored.

*IB* Just what I said earlier: the frontier could be the problem of trying to deal with provincialism. Because I think that's a major problem in the world. It's a problem of the Third World: all these smaller countries trying to deal with these big countries.

*PG* You're dealing with the long distance.

*IB* It's a way of trying to do something about everything.

*InB* Some people *need* New York, some people need Toronto, and we don't seem to have that need. Our work is cut out for us.

*PG* Self-contained?

*InB* It doesn't really matter where we are. We don't have to have the stimulus of lots of other happenings and doings to continue to do what we're doing.



*IB* But it does matter that it happens.

*PG* Are you implying that in terms of stimulus, there's less here for you people than there is in Toronto or New York?

*InB* No, I'm perhaps implying almost the opposite. Because like I was explaining before: being hit with the provincialism of New York — it really hit me.

We were involved in the Sao Paulo Exhibition at that time, and the New York artists were boycotting it. And if you went to a New York art party and you had not agreed to boycott the Sao Paulo Exhibition, you were absolutely ostracized. It was that kind of social group pressure. At that time we were doing the A.C.T.s and A.R.T.s, and one of the acts that we claimed was workers turning chili beans, you know; it had a nice formation.

*AR* That must have made you very popular. (Laughter)

*IB* But they were writing letters, and Lucy and those guys were telling us as Canadians to go along with this whole thing. And we felt, we're in a different country and there's a different point of view.

*InB* No, I think our stimulus is broader than any locale, perhaps. I think the stimulus for our work . . .

*IB* It's from all locales, and at the same time, from one.

*AR* But what you're really into is the art of living. If people know what they ought to know about a lot of art: that it does involve style, and attitudes, and sensuality and intellect and all those things . . . But most people don't take the trouble to attach those values to art or even think that art is more than something to look at.

*IB* Part of our driving force is all of that, and I don't know how it comes out.

*AR* It's that line between art and life that's being worn through. What you're trying to do, I think, is to make the common experience the force or the source of where art is, which I think it is to an amazing degree. On the other hand, unless one is aware in a very complex sense of all the different things that make you do any particular thing that you do, then it seems too much like life and not quite like art.

*InB* It's part of the whole educational process.

*IB* And partly, doing the Eye Scream restaurant is going to be this way of bringing it closer to the everyday real values.

We've both grown. I would like more people to share in that feeling, because I think it's very rewarding to be able to get off on life in that way; so that you don't have to have all kinds of camouflage, and you can see things and appreciate things. In other words, raise your sensitivity level to be able to do that.

*InB* At its very simplest, it's probably just a process of, hey, I like this; don't you?

